

# GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP OF TELEPHONE LINES IN GREAT BRITAIN

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### WHY AND BECAUSE.

Why is it that Government ownership and management of the telephone is practically always a failure? Why is it that for every thousand Europeans there is only one telephone, while for every thousand Americans there are 15? Why is it that the country which has done most to improve the telephone, both technically and commercially, and to popularize its use is the country in which its operation and development have been and still are exclusively the work of private enterprise? Why is it that not one of the innumerable discoveries that have transformed the telephone industry in the last 30 years has emanated from a department of state; that European Governments have been the last to adopt them, and that the verdict which experts are obliged to pass upon them, with perhaps two partial exceptions, is that they have not learned their business? Why is it that there are great and famous towns in Europe at this moment where methods and machinery that were abandoned 20 years ago in America are still in use? Why is it that throughout the length and breadth of Great Britain and the Continent hardly a single efficient long-distance service is to be found? Why is it that in New York one can invariably get the number one wants, and get it at once, while in London one has often to wage a prolonged and embittering battle with a slow operator, insufficient lines, and a conversation—if any conversation ensues—that is only audible when it is interrupted?

The broad answer to all these questions is that the alertness and enterprise that are essential to telephone development can not be expected from a Government department. The characteristics of the bureaucratic mind and temperament forbid it. The organization of a Government office, with a virtually irremovable staff, forbids it. The spirit of officialdom, with its traditions of subordination, its narrow professional outlook, its unwillingness to concentrate responsibility, its insensible stifling of initiative, forbids it. A Government department can not raise and discipline its staff to the same level of efficiency as a commercial company. It can not act with the same freedom and directness as a private board. It can not pursue a business object without deference to a hundred influences and considerations that have nothing to do with business. It can not advertise with anything like the same boldness. It naturally seeks efficiency through economy instead of economy through efficiency.



It has to think of politics and political reactions. Its whole constitution prevents it from proving as enterprising as private initiative, as prompt to discard obsolete methods and apparatus, as quick to adopt new inventions, as skillful and aggressive in gathering in subscribers.

As we all know, to our cost, we have Government ownership and operation of the telephones in Great Britain. We shall never have a telephone system worthy of the name so long as the post office remains in undivided and despotic control. Sooner or later that authority must be modified or delegated if our telephone system is ever to attain an even passable standard of efficiency.

